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ABSTRACT

Presented in a question-and-answer format, this digest offers guidelines to help gifted students manage stress effectively. The following questions are considered: What is stress? How can a youngster experience stress when nothing bad is happening? Is a gifted student more likely to feel stress than others? What are some stresses on a gifted student? How can stress hurt a gifted student's self-esteem? How can it be stressful to have so much potential? How can gifted students cope with stress? How can one tell whether or not a gifted student is experiencing burnout? How can parents, teachers, and counselors reduce stress on gifted students? Among recommendations for coping with stress are changing the source of the stress, confronting the source of the stress, and getting regular physical exercise and sound nutrition. Students should be discouraged from escaping through alcohol, drugs, sleep, frequent illness, overeating, or starving themselves; and from aiming too low. A checklist is provided to identify the student experiencing burnout. Parents, teachers, and counselors are encouraged to reduce stress on gifted students by such measures as helping each gifted student develop a realistic self-concept and letting students live their own lives. Includes 10 references or resources. (DB)

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HELPING GIFTED STUDENTS WITH STRESS MANAGEMENT

What is stress?

Stress is the body's general response to any intense physical, emotional, or mental demand placed on it by oneself or others. While racing to meet a deadline, dealing with a difficult person, or earning a poor grade are all stressful, so are the excitement of playing a lively game of tennis, falling in love, and being selected to join a special program for gifted students.

How can a youngster experience stress when nothing bad is happening?

Anything can be a stressor if it lasts long enough, happens often enough, is strong enough, or is perceived as stress. Working diligently on a project, performing many simple but boring tasks, or earning an "A" grade when one expected an "A+" may all be stressful.

Is a gifted student more likely to feel stress than others?

Many gifted youngsters have a heightened sensitivity to their surroundings, to events, to ideas, and to expectations. Some experience their own high expectations for achievement as a relentless pressure to excel. Constant striving to live up to self-expectations—or those of others—to be first, best, or both can be very stressful. With every new course, new teacher, or new school questions arise about achievement and performance, since every new situation carries with it the frightening risk of being mediocre. Striving becomes even more stressful when unrealistic or unclear expectations are imposed by adults or peers. The pressure to excel, accompanied by other concerns such as feeling different, self-doubt (the "imposter" syndrome), and the need to prove their giftedness can drain the energy of gifted students and result in additional stress.

Stress occurs even when everything is going well. Youngsters get tired from their constant efforts and may secretly fear that next time they will not be as successful.

What are some other stresses on a gifted student?

Many gifted students accept responsibility for a variety of activities such as a demanding course load; leadership in school activities, clubs, or sports; and part-time jobs. Even if it were humanly possible, doing everything well would be physically and emotionally stressful.

Vacations may be stressful if students are comfortable only when achieving and succeeding. Taking time off may make them feel nervous and lacking control.

Gifted students need intellectual challenge. Boring, monotonous busy-work is very stressful for individuals who prefer thinking and reasoning activities. Boredom may result in anger, resentment, or, in some cases, setting personal goals for achievement and success that significantly exceed those of parents or school.

Some gifted students value independence and leadership, yet the separation they feel from their peers results in loneliness and fewer opportunities to relieve stress. Finding a peer group can be difficult, particularly for adolescents. Some experience a conflict between belonging to a group and using their extraordinary abilities.

Gifted students are complex thinkers, persuasively able to argue both sides of any question. This ability, however, may complicate decisions. Students may lack information about and experience with resources, processes, outcomes, or priorities that help tip an argument toward a clear solution. Furthermore, not every problem has one obviously correct answer. Compromise and accommodation are realities in the adult world, but they are not easily perceived from a young person's viewpoint. Thus, decision making may be a very stressful process.

How can stress hurt a gifted student's self-esteem?

During the early years, school may be easy, with minimum effort required for success. If students are not challenged, they conclude that "giftedness" means instant learning, comprehension, and mastery, and that outstanding achievement follows naturally. As years pass, however, schoolwork becomes more difficult. Some students discover that they must work harder to earn top grades and that they have not developed productive study habits. Many suspect they are no longer gifted, and their sense of self-worth is undermined.

Stress can hamper the very abilities that make these students gifted. Stress clouds thinking, reduces concentration, and impairs decision making. It leads to forgetfulness and a loss of ability to focus keenly on a task, and it makes students overly sensitive to criticism. Under these conditions, they perform less well and are more upset by their failures.

Gifted students have so much potential! How can that be stressful?

Abundant gifts and the potential for success in many different subjects and careers may increase opportunities and lead to complex choices. Limiting options is a confusing and upsetting process because it means saying "no" to some attractive alternatives. A person cannot prepare to become an architect and a financial planner, or an advertising executive and a scientist. At some point, the education needed for one career splits from that needed for the other. To set career goals, students must know themselves well as individuals. They must understand their own personalities, values, and goals and use self-awareness as a guide for making decisions. These activities are all stressful.

How can gifted students cope with stress?

Some ways of coping with stress are healthy; others are not. Some healthy ways of handling stress include the following:

Change the source of the stress. Do something else for a while. Put down those study notes and jog for an hour.

Confront the source of the stress. If it is a person, persuade him or her to remove the stress. Ask the teacher for an extension on a project. Sit down with the person driving you crazy and talk about ways you might better work together.

Talk about the source of stress. Rid yourself of frustration. Find a good listener and complain. Talk through possible solutions.

Shift your perspective. Tell yourself that each new situation or problem is a new challenge, and that there is something to be learned from every experience. Try to see the humorous side of the situation.

Learn skills and attitudes that make tasks easier and more successful. Practice effective organization and time-management skills. For example, large projects are easier and less overwhelming when broken down into manageable steps. Learn to type and revise assignments on a word processor. Learn about yourself and your priorities, and use the information to make decisions. Learn how to say "no" gracefully when someone offers you another attractive (or unpleasant) task about which you have a choice. Tell yourself that this unpleasantness will be over soon and that the whole process will bring you closer to reaching your goal. Mark the days that are left on the calendar, and enjoy crossing out each one as you near the finish.

Take time out for enjoyable activities. Everyone needs a support system. Find friends, teachers, or relatives with whom you have fun. Spend time with these people when you can be yourself and set aside the pressures of school, work, or difficult relationships. As a reward for your efforts, give yourself work breaks. Listen to your favorite music, shoot baskets, or participate in some other brief activity that is mentally restful or fun.

Ignore the source of the stress. Practice a little healthy procrastination and put a pleasant activity ahead of the stressful one. This, is, of course, only a short-term solution.

Get regular physical exercise and practice sound nutrition. Physical activity not only provides time out, but also changes your body chemistry as you burn off muscle tension built up from accommodating stress. Exercise also increases resistance to illness. Nutritious food and regular meals help regulate your body chemistry and keep you functioning at your sharpest. Eating healthy and attractively prepared food can be an enjoyable activity on its own.

The following are some *unhealthy* ways students cope with stress:

Escaping through alcohol, drugs, frequent illness, sleep, overeating, or starving themselves. These strategies suggest a permanent withdrawal or avoidance rather than a time out.

Selecting strategies to avoid failure. Gifted students closely link their identities to excellence and achievement. Failure, or even the perception of failure, seriously threatens their self-esteem. By not trying, or by selecting impossible goals, students can escape having their giftedness questioned. Only their lack of effort will be questioned.

Aiming too low. This reduces stress by eliminating intense pressure or possible feelings of failure. Dogged procrastination in starting projects, selecting less competitive colleges or less rigorous courses, or dropping out of school rather than bringing home poor grades allows students to avoid feelings of failure in the short run. Sadly, this sets the stage for long-term disappointment caused by a destructive coping style.

Overscheduling daily life with schoolwork and extracurricular activities, selecting impossibly demanding course loads, or fussing endlessly over assignments in vain attempts to make them perfect. With this strategy, it is possible to succeed only through superhuman effort; thus the student can save face by setting goals too high for anyone to achieve.

How can I tell whether or not a gifted student is experiencing burnout?

Not all gifted youngsters are stressed by the same events. Individual responses to stress also differ: Younger students do not tend to respond to stress in the same way that teenagers do. Since each student is unique, parents and teachers will have to watch carefully to know whether a child is stressed to the point of constructive excitement or to the point of damaging overload.

The following checklist includes many, but not all, symptoms of burnout:

- _____ Student is no longer happy or pleasantly excited about school activities, but, rather, is negative or cynical toward work, teachers, classmates, parents, and the whole school- and achievement-centered experience.
- _____ Student approaches most school assignments with resignation or resentment.
- _____ Student exhibits boredom.

- _____ Student suffers from sleeplessness, problems in falling asleep, or periodic waking.
- _____ Student overreacts to normal concerns or events.
- _____ Student experiences fatigue, extreme tiredness, low energy level.
- _____ Student exhibits unhappiness with self and accomplishments.
- _____ Student has nervous habits such as eye blinking, head shaking, or stuttering.
- _____ Student has physical ailments such as weekly or daily stomachaches or headaches.
- _____ Student is frequently ill.
- _____ Student exhibits dependency through increased clinging or needing and demanding constant support and reassurance.
- _____ Student engages in attention-getting behaviors such as aggressive or acting-out behaviors.
- _____ Student has a sense of being trapped or a feeling of being out of control.
- _____ Student is unable to make decisions.
- _____ Student has lost perspective and sense of humor.
- _____ Student experiences increased feelings of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion in work and activities that used to give pleasure.

How can parents, teachers, and counselors reduce stress on gifted students?

Help each gifted student understand and cope with his or her intellectual, social, and emotional needs during each stage of development. In some ways, the needs of gifted students mirror those of more typical children. Giftedness, however, adds a special dimension to self-understanding and self-acceptance. If gifted youngsters are to develop into self-fulfilled adults, the following differential needs must be addressed: (a) the need to understand the ways in which they are different from others and the ways in which they are the same; (b) the need to accept their abilities, talents, and limitations; (c) the need to develop social skills; (d) the need to feel understood and accepted by others; and (e) the need to develop an understanding of the distinction between "pursuit of excellence" and "pursuit of perfection." VanTassel-Baska (1989) and Delisle (1988) have offered useful suggestions on how to meet these needs.

Help each gifted student develop a realistic and accurate self-concept. Giftedness does not mean instant mastery or winning awards. Parents and teachers need to set realistic expectations for efforts and achievements and help the student choose appropriate goals. It is important to recognize and appreciate efforts and improvement.

On the other hand, giftedness permits people to learn and use information in unusual ways. Given parental support and encouragement, personal motivation, and opportunities to learn and apply their knowledge, gifted students

may enjoy the process of creating new ideas, especially if they believe that it is all right to think differently than age-mates.

Help each gifted student be a whole person. Gifted youngsters are children first and gifted second. While their learning styles may be special, they are individuals with emotions, likes and dislikes, and unique personalities. They will not wake up one day and be "not gifted." They should not feel responsible for solving world problems, nor does the world owe them tribute. It is up to each student to make life meaningful. Understanding these realistic limits to the bounty of giftedness can reduce stress on confused students.

Gifted students have strong emotions that give personal meaning to each experience. Emotions should be recognized, understood, and used as a valid basis for appropriate behaviors.

Show patience. Let students select and strive toward their own goals. Do not compare them or their achievements to others.

Some gifted students are intensely curious and may have less tolerance for ambiguity and unpredictability than their age-mates. Help them develop patience with themselves.

Show acceptance and encouragement. Encourage students to work purposefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly and do the best they can. It is not necessary to excel in every situation. Help them develop priorities to decide which tasks require the best efforts and which require simply "good enough."

Accept and reward efforts and the process of working on tasks. Sincere effort is valuable in itself and deserves reinforcement. The means may be more deserving of merit than the ends. Efforts are within the gifted students' control; the outcomes (high grades, prizes, honors, etc.) are not. Show love and acceptance, regardless of the outcome. These youngsters need to be cherished as individuals, not simply for their accomplishments. They must know that they can go home and be loved—and continue to love themselves—even when they do not finish first or best.

Encourage flexibility and appropriate behavior. Curiosity is frequently mentioned as a characteristic of gifted learners. Many individuals agree that gifted students seem to question rules automatically, asking "How come?" Concerned adults can reduce stress on gifted students by helping them distinguish between hard-and-fast rules that should be followed and those that can safely be questioned or altered and helping them understand why rules sometimes change from time to time.

Many people recognize that new ideas come from reshaping and discarding old notions of right and wrong and want students to be inquiring, creative, and resourceful thinkers. But society, schools, teachers, and academic subjects have rules. In our society, flagrant rule breakers may be penalized and shut out of opportunities for further growth and enrichment. Our students will become better thinkers by learning that rules are man-made guides to behavior, not perfect or divine, but they are to be learned, understood, and followed appropriately in certain situations. For instance, not every student will like every teacher, but show-

ing respect is appropriate behavior even if the student privately thinks otherwise. Wise adults can model problem-solving methods that result in workable solutions and help gifted students learn when and how to use their novel perceptions, creativity, and independent thoughts appropriately and effectively.

Understanding and following rules does not mean conforming to every situation. There are some occasions when gifted students should not be expected to accommodate others. For example, a severe mismatch between a youngster's ability level and a school program may be very stressful. Altering the student's curriculum may solve the problem.

Some parents unintentionally send mixed messages regarding behavior. When children are rude or uncooperative and offend teachers, other adults, or peers, their parents behave as though giftedness somehow excuses such behavior and the offending actions highlight their child's specialness. Some even seem pleased. These parents do their children a great disservice by denying them the opportunity to learn empathy, teamwork, and tolerance for individual differences.

Let students live their own lives. Caring adults support, encourage, and celebrate students' efforts and successes, but they stand back a bit from these efforts and achievements. They let students select and master activities for personal enjoyment. Unfortunately, some students wonder whether their efforts and gains are for personal satisfaction or to please overly involved parents, teachers, or others. When these students wish to give up an activity that no longer brings pleasure or interest, they fear they will disappoint others, and they are likely to feel trapped.

Be available for guidance and advice. Some gifted students appear to be more mature than their chronological age indicates. They have advanced verbal skills and can talk a good line. Nevertheless, they are still children and need realistic, clearly stated guidelines about limits, values, and proper behavior. These young people may not have enough information or experience to make wise and effective decisions. They may not understand decision-making processes, and they need wise adults to listen and guide as they talk through the problem, the alternatives, and the pro's and con's and try out choices. Knowing that they can be independent and still talk through their thoughts with others without losing face reduces stress for these students.

Gifted students need to hear adults openly state some of their perspectives to understand expectations and acceptable limits. While these students are very perceptive, they cannot read minds.

Gifted students may know more facts about their interest area than do their parents and other adults. However, they have not lived longer; they need loving concern and guidance.

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